

## Scripture Reading:

Acts 28:1-7 “Now when they had escaped, they then found out that the island was called Malta.

2 And the natives showed us unusual kindness; for they kindled a fire & made us all welcome, because of the rain that was falling and because of the cold. 3 But when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and laid them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat, and fastened on his hand. 4 So when the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, "No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he has escaped the sea, yet justice does not allow to live." 5 But he shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. 6 However, they were expecting that he would swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But after they had looked for a long time and saw no harm come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god. 7 In that region there was an estate of the leading citizen of the island, whose name was Publius, who received us and entertained us courteously for three days.”

# "The Vanity of Idolatry"

After being cast about in the Mediterranean Sea by a vicious storm for over two weeks, the Alexandrian ship has been lost, and all those on board have been delivered safely on the shore of an Island called Malta.

➤ Quite appropriately Malta or Melita as you will find in some translations, means refuge.

The Lord has been faithful to Paul in granting the lives of all those on board giving them refuge on this island. We have talked about the storms of life in previous weeks as we know that each and every one of us will experience them, be they big or small, whether short or long.

We often comfort one another with the words of Paul written to the Saints in Rome some years earlier knowing that all things work together for our good! But, we must remember that the full context of this promise comes with the assurance that the Spirit of God brings us through life's storms, just as He did for Paul and these other men.

Hear again, with ears of faith, these comforting words from Romans 8, which I am sure came back to Paul's mind often during the storm...

“14 For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. 15 For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father." 16 The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs--heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. 18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. 19 For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. 20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; 21 because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. 22 For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. 23 Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. 24 For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance. 26 Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. 27 Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God. 28 And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

29 For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. 30 Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified. 31 What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?"

- These are great promises that we must claim for all of our lives!

These are promises we will celebrate as we bury the body of our dear brother Doug Spence and remember and celebrate his life on Saturday!

- We do so knowing that Doug is in glory and that on the Day of Resurrection, he and all of us will be glorified just as God has promised!

What we see here in Paul's journey is a small taste of that greater story...

- They are delivered to a place of refuge and find not enslavement, as could be expected for strangers in that ancient world, but hospitality!

That is the BIG picture, but we also have some other important lessons, so let's dig into our text...

So God delivers them to the Island of Malta, their refuge from the storm.

- They find not only physical safety with their escape from the storm at sea, but great hospitality as well!

2 "And the natives showed us unusual kindness; for they kindled a fire & made us all welcome, because of the rain that was falling and because of the cold."

The term native or even barbarian as you will find in some translations simply means those whose language and customs were outside the Greek or Roman culture. It does not mean these people were primitive or savage and the hospitality they show confirms this.

- As we see from our text these people were not Christians and yet they are kind to these strangers who are cast on their shores.

While man in his fallen state has no way to be righteous before our Holy God, he is still made in God's image and in some measure reflects His character... Thus we see mothers loving and caring for their children, most cultures abhorring murder and showing some respect for property.

Even with such principles, which some would call common graces, we must acknowledge that they exist only because of the grace of God and the restraining power of the Holy Spirit over man's sin... This is evidenced by how rapidly man declined into sin without such restraint after the fall of man, with the world in utter ruin in just nine generations at the time of Noah.

The people of Malta offer our travelers warmth and shelter and then we see in the Apostle Paul another important example for us to follow...

3 "But when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and laid them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat, and fastened on his hand."

- Now before we get to the exciting part about the snake, I do want us to notice that Paul in his exhausted state is still willing to serve.
- It was our Lord Jesus Himself who set the great example and commanded us to serve each other.

Even as He faced His greatest trial and the agony of bearing our sins on the cross, Jesus served His disciples by washing their feet at the Last Supper.

Jesus then said to His disciples, “12 “Do you know what I have done to you? 13 You call me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. 14 If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. 15 For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. 16 Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. 17 If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.”

- We are to live lives of service so that being the servant of others becomes second nature to us!

I believe such is the case here with Paul: Not only did he help with the work on the ship during the storm, but even now, cold and exhausted on this island, he is more than willing to help by putting wood on the fire. It is always a blessing for me to see how such service takes place each Lord's Day in the setting up this hall for services and preparing for our fellowship meal.

- After the service, no one barks orders or even organizes each step, but each week all the work gets done!

This takes nothing away from those who put the time and effort into organizing and preparing our meals or my work on the order of worship. Someone had to build this massive fire [remember we have 276 cold and wet men], just as Mark always makes sure the chairs go up in the morning and Steve makes sure the glasses are washed at the end.

- But the blessing also comes when someone sees something that needs to be done & just simply does it!

We live in an age where folks are usually more interested in what they can get out of something rather than taking the opportunity to serve and this is a great place for us to show our Christian witness...

Children, you learn this at home with a willing heart that NOT ONLY does the things you are asked to do, with a smile on your face, but one that also notices other things that can be done to help...

- AND does them without being asked to do so!
- Like picking up a toy left outside by a brother or sister or maybe even cleaning your room before you are told to do so.

Obviously, as we grow older this extends to how we treat each other as husband and wife in our family relationships and especially for you men in the work force... Again, NOT looking to see how you can get out of tasks, but taking opportunities to serve when such service is not expected or commanded.

Of course such service means a little extra effort or doing something you might not otherwise have done, which could in turn cause a bit of inconvenience for you as this service on the island did for the Apostle Paul!

- In fact, things got a bit exciting for Paul because of his willingness to help with the fire...

3 “But when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and laid them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat, and fastened on his hand.”

Now I want to stop here and have a bit of fun with some of the more liberal commentators who really don't want us to take the Bible as seriously as we should. Those who are embarrassed by miracles and such & try to sanitize the Scriptures. So children, please listen to this verse again and let me ask you a question:

3 “But when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and laid them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat, and fastened on his hand.”

- Did Paul get bitten by this snake?

Now I want to jump down to verse six where we see the reaction of those who lived on Malta & ask you another question:

6 “ they were expecting that he would swell up or suddenly fall down dead.”

- Do you think this was a poisonous snake?

- **The answers are obvious because they are!**

**You can read those verses in Greek, Latin, or ANY of the many English versions and you will get the same answers, IF you read them honestly!**

- **Paul was bitten by a very poisonous snake and the reactions that Luke goes on to record make NO sense if this is not true.**

**People who try to soften Luke's orderly account by saying that the snake did not really bite Paul or that it was not a dangerous snake sadly miss the important lessons about idolatry that we can learn from this account.**

- **There are also enemies of the Bible who want to claim that it is obviously wrong at this point because there are no poisonous snakes on the island of Malta today.**

**I guess the easiest way to answer that unwarranted attack on the Bible is to ask when was the last time someone saw a rattlesnake here in Sacramento or Roseville? Just as our populated valley has no snakes anymore, unlike the foothills, this island of Malta today has over 400,000 people on it and the snakes and other beasts have long since been eliminated. In fact this island is now the 8<sup>th</sup> most densely populated nation on our planet with some 3,200 people per square mile. By comparison, California has only 235 people per square mile and even Sacramento county has only about 1300 folks per square mile.**

- **This could lead me into another whole sermon on how the earth is far from full, but I will have to leave that for another day.**

**Realizing and accepting the fact that Luke is giving us a true historical account of what happened on this island means that we can learn a very important point about idolatry that we need to be reminded of often.**

- **I believe that Luke includes this brief account so we can once again see the vanity of unbelief: Of serving and worshiping fate or nature rather than the living God.**

**Without God's revelation, man is left to his own wisdom...**

**4 "So when the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, "No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he has escaped the sea, yet justice does not allow to live."**

**At first this seems to make sense: Even though Paul had been saved from the storm at sea he was still some sort of bad apple who was now being punished by the Greek god Justice.**

- **The Greeks and Romans had gods for everything!**

**Now we need to remember that they were not necessarily wrong to think this might be the case, but it serves as a warning that we do not always know the BIG picture of what God is doing.**

**Remember that Job's friends were very sure that they had figured out what was happening to Job and why. All he needed to do was confess his sin! Job knew this was NOT why he was suffering and yet even he did not fully understand what God was doing and is greatly humbled in the final chapters.**

**The people from Malta were sure they had things figured out, but it did not turn out as they expected:**

**5 "But [Paul] shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. 6 However, they were expecting that he would swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But after they had looked for a long time and saw no harm come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god."**

- **This is quite a change of heart!**
- **Paul goes from being a hardened criminal who cannot escape his just punishment to being a god!**

**Luke, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit is giving us a final warning about the dangers of idolatry.**

God's people have been warned about this from the time when Abraham was commissioned to take the promised land, down to one of the final epistles in the Scriptures where John concluded First John by simply saying, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols."

- Idolatry is foolish as evidenced by these men now worshipping someone they thought a murderer just a few moments earlier.

It is foolishness that also results from turning away from the living God. As Paul declared to the Saints in Rome, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, 19 because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. 20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, 21 because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Professing to be wise, they became fools, 23 and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man--and birds and four-footed animals & creeping things."

Rather than join the Apostle Paul in worshipping the living God who had delivered all these men safely to this island, they suppress true knowledge and choose to make a mere man a god.

Paul will go on to be a powerful witness for Jesus on this island as we will see next week, but for this morning I hope we will see the stark contrast between the comforting words we read from Romans chapter eight and the vanity of idolatry...

- Putting something in the place of god as a result of foolish thinking!

We can think of many examples of men who did great evil in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century because people looked up to them and followed them as gods, but we must remember that men like Hitler or Stalin could never have accomplished what they did without the foolish thinking that gave us evolution in place of the living God.

No longer were we called upon to serve one another as fellow creatures made in the image of God...

- We were now just advanced animals and the great commandment simply became survival of the fittest.
- As a result, tens of millions were sacrificed to the god of advancement or survival.

Sadly there are many today who have seen the vanity of such manipulation but they have not repented and returned to the living God... Rather they have turned inward to yoga and meditation and other eastern religions that seek peace within.

- Of course they will discover that the same evil that is so apparent in mass murder is also present in their own hearts as a fallen son or daughter of Adam.

No amount of meditation or yoga or psychiatry or drugs will be able to take away their sin... Only the blood of Jesus can do that and that is the Good News that we are to proclaim to the nations of the earth. Whether we are talking with a friend or neighbor who is struggling, or we are like a Detrick Bonheoffer who confronted the evil of Hitler...

- The message is the same...

"14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. 16 For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. 17 For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. 18 He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God."

- **As we continue on with the ordinary time of our church calendar this year may we learn and remember to be those who keep ourselves from idols!**
- **And may we always be those who are never too busy to serve and always ready to share the Good News.**

**Communion Meditation: John 13**

**“Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end. 2 And supper being ended, the devil having already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray Him, 3 Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, 4 rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. 5 After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded.”**